

Safe Routes to School – the next steps in the journey

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1. Background

The Safe Routes to School program commenced in South Australia in 1996. This initiative was to increase the safety of all primary school children travelling to and from school as pedestrians, passengers or cyclists. Four outcomes were identified at the time:

- a safer environment for primary school children travelling to school
- an increase in the number of children walking to school
- less congestion by motor vehicles around schools
- parent participation in road safety community based programs.

This South Australian Government program is managed by the Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure (DTEI). Through the Safe Routes to School program DTEI has engaged in a true partnership to solve the safety issues around the whole school and its adjoining environment. This partnership consists of State and Local Government (with direct involvement from Council's traffic engineer), the school and its community. There are currently over 170 primary schools in the program with 37 of these schools in regional South Australia.

2. Safe Routes to School Program

The Safe Routes to School program comprises two key components; engineering and education. Data sources such as parent surveys and site observations are then used to address these components by identifying the traffic management issues at the school and also identifying behavioural issues for both children and parents. The families at the school have direct involvement in both processes.

2.1. Engineering improvements

Traffic Engineers from DTEI and the local council work together to assess engineering improvements for each school using the data collected in the travel surveys and site observations. As most Safe Routes to School programs involve groups of up to five schools in the same geographic area, some of the proposed engineering solutions benefit more than one school because a particular road can be a route for more than one school.

The types of treatments installed include some or all of the following:

- child pedestrian crossings
- pedestrian refuges
- kerb ramps
- footpath improvements

- linemarking
- pick up/drop off zones
- signs
- parking improvements
- pedestrian fencing.

2.2. Education initiatives

The teaching of road safety is not compulsory in South Australian schools, so to encourage its inclusion, and embed it in the school's curriculum, DTEI provides training and support to all teachers from schools in the program. Up to four teachers from each school attend a full day training called 'Teaching 4 Traffic' so that they can:

- be familiar with, and have an understanding of, 'Road Ready', the South Australian road safety teaching resource
- be familiar with the 'Way To Go' parent information sheets and how to link them to the 'Road Ready' units of work
- develop a school specific road safety education plan based on the issues identified from the data sources
- develop a road safety vision statement.

The road safety education plan identifies the units of work from 'Road Ready' that are to be used when teaching road safety in the classroom and the associated 'Way to Go' parent information sheets. The road safety vision statement embeds road safety into the school's policy and culture and is usually endorsed by a school's Governing Council or Board.

To assist schools in continuing to teach road safety well into the future DTEI provides ongoing support to these trained teachers by holding training and development evenings for them and providing assistance at any time from DTEI's Education Consultant. Many schools having been in the program for 10 years and still continue to teach road safety. This is attributable to the ongoing support provided by DTEI and has also established DTEI's credibility with schools and teachers.

3. Evaluation of the Safe Routes to School program

An evaluation of the Safe Routes to School program was conducted in 2000 and 2001 (Couch, McCutcheon et al). The evaluation was based conceptually in a realistic evaluation framework (Pawson and Tilley 1997). Rather than measuring against pre-determined outcomes, this evaluation approach attempted to determine "what worked for whom in what circumstances".

The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact and effectiveness of Safe Routes to School. Specific objectives were:

- to assess the impact of the Safe Routes to School Program
- to track the progress of implementation of the program and identify factors necessary for success, and
- to assess the impact of the Safe Routes to School Program on pedestrian and passenger safety of the children in primary schools that participated.

Below are some findings taken directly from the evaluation report.

- “A mark of the success of the program for most schools was the improvement of traffic management around the school in a way that took road safety off the list of top concerns of the school.
- All schools where the program had moved beyond the planning phase reported shifts and changes in patterns of pedestrian and vehicle movement (students and parents) and in directions which the school community assesses as being safer.
- One of the ways in which school communities expressed this was to express relief that what had been a long-term ‘festering sore’ was no longer a seemingly unmanageable problem for the school.
- While there were various ways in which stakeholders expressed concerns for safety, health and the environment, the point at which most stakeholders found common ground was in terms of traffic management.”

4. Achievements

Since the commencement of the Safe Routes to School program there have been significant achievements which include:

- increased safety on roads in the vicinity of, and adjacent to the school
- improved traffic management around the school
- road safety education being taught in the classroom
- parents being provided with important road safety information
- some increase in children walking to school.

5. Bike Ed

This program has been successfully operating in South Australia since 1995 with over 400 programs delivered to primary schools. Up until 2003 Bike Ed was managed by another administrative unit of DTEI resulting in a lack of coordination between the delivery of the Safe Routes to School and Bike Ed programs. Since 2003 there has been a more strategic

approach to the delivery of Bike Ed where schools undertaking the 'Teaching 4 Traffic' training as part of the Safe Routes to School program are encouraged to incorporate Bike Ed into their road safety education plans.

6. Other Programs

DTEI through its Travelsmart program has recently commenced the 'Walking School Bus' and 'Green Travel Challenge' in schools. These programs, including Safe Routes to School and Bike Ed are all managed within the same administrative unit. Another program in schools that DTEI manages from a different administrative unit is a rail safety program called 'SafeTrack'. This program is focussed on primary schools near railway lines, with many of these schools also being part of the Safe Routes to School program. The facilitators of 'SafeTrack' are encouraging schools that are in both programs to incorporate 'SafeTrack' into their Road Safety Education Plan. The management of 'SafeTrack' will remain in its current administrative unit.

Some of these programs will be the catalyst for increasing non car trips to school. There is no expectation that all children will be travelling to school in a non car mode as there are many factors that determine what transport mode is used. They can be:

- distance from school
- age of child and other siblings
- the school trip being part of a parent/caregiver's journey to work
- the school trip being part of dropping off siblings to childcare or secondary school
- what the parent decides as part of their personal beliefs or preferences.

7. South Australian Government Direction

South Australia's Strategic Plan has some key targets that DTEI has lead responsibility in achieving. These are:

- by 2010 reduce road fatalities to less than 90 persons per year
- by 2010 reduce serious injuries to less than 1000 per year.
- increase the use of public transport to 10% of metropolitan weekday passenger vehicle kilometres travelled by 2018.

There are other key targets in the strategic plan that DTEI does not have lead responsibility but will be a major contributor:

- achieve the Kyoto target by limiting the state's greenhouse gas emissions to 108% of 1990 levels during 2008-2012, as the first step towards reducing emissions by 60% (to 40% of 1990 levels) by 2050
- reduce South Australia's ecological footprint by 30% by 2050.

These targets are reflected in DTEI's corporate plan and have actions attached at the administrative unit level.

8. What does the future hold?

With different programs being delivered into primary schools the convergence of these programs in the school setting needs to be seamless. Schools need to have a single point of contact to ensure a 'customer centric', integrated delivery approach. Some of our school programs have strongly established branding and it is important in any integration that these programs do not lose their identity. It will also need to be clear to schools that the new programs they are accessing will enhance, extend and build on the skills and knowledge in their current programs.

The success of the Safe Routes to School and Bike Ed programs gives DTEI an advantage when wanting to implement other programs to schools. As mentioned earlier, the fact that Safe Routes to School has addressed the issue of traffic management around schools, and it was at this point that most stakeholders found common ground, other initiatives can be introduced without the school saying "but it is not safe". With over 170 primary schools now part of the program there is a captive audience where we will be able to value add other programs to compliment the existing safety focus at the school. This will provide an opportunity to deliver programs to schools that will be a catalyst to increase the non car mode travel to school with health and climate change outcomes.

The other strength of the program is that schools, in particular teachers, have confidence in what DTEI promises so they are very likely to take on other initiatives. This is a result of the strong relationships that have been built from the time schools have joined the Safe Routes to School program. With some of the schools having been in the program for 10 years these relationships have built trust and credibility between DTEI and schools, and in particular the teachers. An example of this is that a few schools in the Safe Routes to School "family" have already enhanced their current road safety education plan to include 'Travelsmart' activities. The intention will be that all current schools in the Safe Routes to School program have their plans amended to have a broader focus on public transport, walking and cycling.

There are various teaching resources that are used by schools in DTEI's programs. They are currently being reviewed and combined into one integrated 'transport department' resource. This will benefit teachers when they are teaching activities for different programs, with all the activities being contained in the one resource. The resource will only include the classroom activities with the curriculum links placed on the DTEI website. This will save reprinting the resource when the curriculum framework changes.

Programs such as the 'Green Travel Challenge' and 'Walking School Bus' are able to increase the number of children walking and cycling to school. The 'Green Travel Challenge' although delivered to children provides the opportunity to influence the child's family in making better travel choices. DTEI's primary objectives are transport outcomes, however there will be other benefits relating to the larger government agenda on climate change initiatives.

DTEI is currently in the process of developing a road safety strategy for the south east of regional South Australia. Schools that are located in the smaller rural towns will have different program needs that the ones in the major regional centres.

Currently in South Australia the Department for Education and Childrens Services is in the process of forming 'super schools' which will mean consolidating a number of schools, both primary and secondary onto one site. This may then create a school with a larger catchment area and possibly changing the transport options for children. The challenge will be to encourage less car travel when distances from the school may be greater.

The key to success will be how well DTEI can converge these programs into the whole school environment. The Minister for Road Safety has commissioned a 'stock take' of road safety education in schools which includes all the programs mentioned above. This will also provide opportunities to coordinate with programs delivered by the SA Police and other road safety program providers.

9. Conclusion

Primary schools are overwhelmed with new initiatives or programs and it is typical to say "let's start with the kids". Too many times programs are 'dumped' on schools with little or no training and without any continual support in both human and physical resources. Programs are then implemented once, and forgotten – not deliberately, but because it becomes low on the agenda. There can be many factors that explain why this happens e.g., a change in the school leadership, change of school staff, competing claims on the curriculum. Having someone in constant contact with the school is generally the prompt for a program to continue and to be on the school's agenda.

The Safe Routes to School experience has shown that by giving schools a "what's in it for them" by improving the traffic management in and around their school with tangible improvements, combined with the conditional teaching of road safety in the classroom, becomes a working combination of two of the three E's in road safety. The ongoing support reminds schools to implement their component of the program and gives DTEI credibility in working with schools. The challenge is now to give schools other programs to encourage more children to walk or cycle to school, to complement the safety initiatives that have been

put in place. This may result in extra classroom teaching and any new initiatives will therefore need to be flexible and responsive to the school community's needs. These are the next steps in the journey.

References

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South Australia's Strategic Plan 2007